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ABSTRACT

This paper examines classroom techniques for stimulating students' critical faculties in viewing commercial television. The thrust is not only to increase critical viewing judgments, but also to heighten their knowledge of the literary elements of television. Television literacy may be developed by attention to the artistry of the television production elements that create the images. The commercial television elements of genre conventions, format and programming conventions, and video production can be identified, discussed, and critically viewed as they interact. The activities suggested in this packet are characteristic of a media literacy curriculum that will help students gain in awareness and understanding of television through active participation. Perceptive television viewing, class discussion, and actual production experiences are suggested that will help students become more concerned critical viewers or nonviewers of commercial television. A listing of resources is included. (RAA)

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ACTIVE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

FOCUSING ON CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF COMMERCIAL TELEVISION

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A SPRINGBOARD FOR ACTIVE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT,

FOCUSING ON CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF COMMERCIAL TELEVISION©

Television today enters our lives in many guises. It enters to provide us information, entertainment and learning experiences. We have the face of Public Broadcasting, the face of instructional television, and the face of commercial television.

We as educators are concerned with the impact that television has on students. We are often distressed regarding the amount of television that young people are watching today. Dr. Gavriel Salomon at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel, a leading researcher in the field of media, warns us that the information that children receive via television is presented so densely, so much more understandably, that reading for pleasure will continue to decline and television viewing will continue to increase.

We have in 1979 excellent television entertainment provided for us via Public Broadcasting. In school our children are using more and more instructional television each year as the quality of instructional television improves. However, we will be focusing on commercial television. Why? Because that is what the kids are watching. We would like to channel this interest into a visual learning experience, hopefully making them more selective viewers than the generation that has preceeded them. Richard Hawley, dean of students at University School in Hunting Valley, Ohio has put it rather succinctly. "Since children who watch a fair amount of television will quite naturally assume they are being told and shown the truth, it seems to me crucial that they are exposed to models who view it selectively and critically, who judge it by criteria other than its potential to engage. My own experience has been that students are surprised, but not hostile, when television programming is harshly judged. I think they may even come to like the idea that they themselves, at their discriminating best, are in the process of becoming people television ought to measure up to." (American Film, January, 1979)

Our unit focuses on two main areas. The first section deals with literary elements and the visual interpretation of those elements. The second section deals with the video elements and their manipulation and contribution to the visual experience. We suggest active involvement on the part of the student and list viewing activities.

OBJECTIVES

What is critical analysis?

The student will critically examine, analyze and discuss:

a. Television entertainment and information formats.

b. Commercial messages.

The student will appreciate and better understand the elements of broadcasting, i.e., literary, telematic, writing, listening, viewing, cooperative effort and creativity.

The student will demonstrate evaluations of the media as a source of information, news, entertainments, learning and art form.

Our unit was designed primarily for a middle-school or high school audience. However, having shared this information with others who are involved in primary and intermediate education, it is felt that the unit will, with modifications, be adaptable to other age groups also. We are consciously trying to avoid preaching, and instead allow students to develop their own critical skills.

<u>Suggested Measurable Objectives</u>

Make a logical connection or extension
Arrive at a conslusion via induction or deduction
Relate significance to self, others, etc.
Exhibit excitement/enjoyment
Stimulate questions
Stimulate participative discussion and/or writing
Demonstrate a skill or knowledge

TELEVISION LITERACY

I. IDEA FORMS, or modes of expression, are presented in several ways.

A. The Abstract form where value questions are presented vs. the action drama format of most commercial programming.

B. The Expository form, where information is presented in news, or documentary. Information is the key. Questions regarding the total coverage, missing pieces of information, and time allotments to various segments should be raised. Also questions regarding the points of view being presented and how to decide whether information is documentary or docu-drama.

C. The Narrative mode follows logically in explanation of point of view. Who is telling the story? Whether the story is fact or fiction, we would like to be able to perceive the point of view. Is it being presented from several points of view, is this a subjective narration, is it a voice-over technique?

D. The Dramatic form. Questions should be raised as to whether the narrative is staged. Often this obvious in a fiction piece. However, in documentaries, the manipulation of dramatic elements is not always as obvious to the young viewer.

E. The Telematic form, which consists of all of the above, plus sound and light and color equaling the culmination of the television image. As a literary format, we have two levels of this image.

1. major image, what is the real story, what do you remember best when you turn off the program?

2. minor image, was there a sub-plot, characters, values presented, messages given that were not as overt as the major image?

II. The Traditional Elements and Structure of a Literary Event that might be used to analyze commercial television consist of the following:

A. Conflict. The types of conflict that are used in literature are:

1. Person against person
2. Person against nature
3. Person against society
4. Person against self
5. Person against opposing ideas and philosophies

B. Theme. The major idea being presented.

C. Crisis. The dramatic events that create suspense, frustration or intensity.

D. Denouement. The untying, the outcome, often a fall in the action. (In t.v., this is often sloppy, loose ends with very little logical development)

Examples of Literary Elements on Television vs. Literature

Television		Literature
Personality physical attributes, stereotypes, clothes, etc. Stars are often used as guests because of the uni-dimensionality of the lead characters	vs.	Character development motivation/psycho-logical development growth/change
Situation emphasis on action, action in lieu of conflict	vs.	Plot a chain of related events that leads you to the reason for the story,relation to conflict importance
Opening sequence series of scenes telling it all	vs.	Narrative Hook a teaser - drawing us into a story
Set the flat sets of sitcoms appear to have changed little in the past 20 years	vs.	Setting establishing time and place with flair
Distancing movement through scenes,	vs.	Point of View who am I,as I see this story?

Obviously, all commercial television is not "bad". It is interesting to take some of the leaders, such as Vegas, Starsky & Hutch, Charlie's Angels, Laverne and Shirley, Three's Company, Lou Grant, Family, Paper Chase, etc. and allow students to arrive at their own opinions using the above as a frame of reference.

Analyze characters in two leading t.v. sitcoms, first by turning off the audio and watching the character's action. Secondly, by listening only to the audio and then analyzing the character by what has been said, and the sound effects, such as music, that relate to that character.

SAMPLE PROGRAM ANALYSIS SHEET

TITLE _____

MAIN CHARACTER(S) describe briefly _____

_____

SETTING : _____

_____

CLIMATE: _____

PLOT? CONFLICT? _____

_____

_____

ANTAGONIST(S) _____

_____

VIOLENT ACTS? List _____

_____

WOMEN IN PROGRAM? Describe _____

_____

MINORITIES? WHAT ROLE? _____

_____

RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT? _____

_____

COMMERCIAL MESSAGES

Product	People In Ad ?	Type of Appeal

III. TELEVISION ELEMENTS

A. GENRES-the types of programs seen, copied from radio, vaudeville the dime novel. Each genre has its own defining conventions which characterize one from another.

1. Action/Adventure: chase scenes, male hero and side-kick, fights and or other violence, fast-moving climax and denouement
2. Mystery: intrigue, puzzling problem, master detective aids victims, setting and music important
3. Science Fiction: future-based adventure or mystery; often value-laden from present
4. Situation comedy: larger-than-life-characters who represent all of us, exaggerated to be funny. . .recognizable, home situations, stock characters in family members and neighbors
5. Western: loner hero, great shot and horseman, ranchers vs. farmers, small town sheriff, bad guys, bank robbery, little love interest except the school marm or dance-hall girl
6. Romance/Serial/Daytime Drama: the continuing story of an amazingly interrelated group of people who spend most of their time drinking coffee and discussing one anothers' problems; static

B. FORMAT/PROGRAMMING-television schedules its programs in a repetitive format, and then repeats commercials. The elements to be considered here are:

1. The Expected: Block scheduling which creates nights for situation comedies, action, etc. Also, programs follow one another so that we get hooked for the evening. . .
2. Repetition: Comfort and passivity are generated by the repetition of shows, ads, types, and well as by repetition in formats or genres

C. SETTING- for each genre, certain settings become expected as we

1. Established place and time- so the show can start out immediately with plot; flat settings often; recognizable, familiar
2. Create mood and/or atmosphere-the setting helps define the genre but also the mood, frightening, serene,western adventure, etc.
3. Project action-setting establishes what type of action we can expect from the genre set before us

IV. TELEVISION PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

A. CAMERA MOVEMENTS - pan left or right, zoom in closer or back for a long shot, dolly or track to follow action, boom up or down, helicopter or underwater shots- all create action by moving the camera rather than the subject being taped. Camera movements create excitement, interest, and action, imitate our eye movements in following subjects' actions, and limit our viewpoints.

IV. TELEVISION PRODUCTION ELEMENTS, cont.

B. SUBJECT MOVEMENT - the action which precipitates the plot; dynamic or static, staged and shot. Dynamic action is created by non-symmetry, by action, in diagonal lines as opposed to horizontal lin by movements outside the frame or moving from within to outside the fra

C. SHOT TYPES - the shot is the basic element of the video production, and exists when one comera is used with out being turned off, until another shot is added or edited on. Commercial television used the long shot, medium shot, close shot sequence to establish scene and character. For variation, this sequence is sometimes reversed. Camera placement can be at, above, or below eye level, and can be place for subjective or objective point of view.

D. COMPOSITION - the total arringement of elements within the frame, objects, people, natural setting. Often television uses a very symmetrical, centered-within-the-frame composition which creates little extra interest but show us what we need to see. Action occuring outside the frame or moving out or in to the frame would be something used to create interest.

E. SOUND TRACK - music is utilized at the beginning, end, and often throughout the production, to develop mood, create tension, or just lead into the commercial breaks. Sounds are added for perspective, to describe time of day (night) or setting, and to initiate a laugh from the audience-the laugh track.

F. TIME CHANGES - time can be expanded or contracted, stopped all together or speeded up for humorous effects, by the way the show is taped and edited. Time is often contracted so we see several days in less than one hour; time is also expanded to create tension or suspense.

G. COLOR - color is planned to set the mood of the genre; bright colors for comedy, subdued ones for drama, royal colors when called for by character, washed out and drab color for westerns. Costumes used repeat these colors.

H. LIGHTING - basically the lighting allows all the other elements to be seen by the camera. Lighting is often flat; that is, not enough background lighting is used to create depth. Television is often characterized also by lack of shadow; the interplay of light and dark is rarely used; characters are shot in full light (settings are often outdoors in sunlight)

I. TITLES AND CREDIT SEQUENCES - are repeated each week to set habits of viewing; recognizable music, characters, scenes

J. EDITING - All the elements are edited together to create a familiarity with which we can become comfortable; certain sequences of shots are repeated, the pacing is predictable and the shot lengths are determened by the genre, the plot, and the commercial breaks as well as by aesthetic considerations of video technique. The pace is accelerated for climax, lingering for tragedy, and fairly regular for the most part, so that we continue watching through the ads.

SAMPLE PROGRAM ANALYSIS SHEET, PART II

GENRE: identify the conventions used_____

_____

TITLE: describe the title, credit sequences_____

_____

SETTING: realistic or conventional; ordinary or imaginative; two- or three-dimensional?_____

_____

INTRODUCTORY SEQUENCE: number of shots; types of opening shots?_____

_____ _____

MUSIC: describe the mood, pace, introduction, silences_____

_____

SOUND TRACK: sound effects? sound presence? laugh track?_____

_____

LIGHTING: shadows? brightness? harshness? night shots too bright?_

_____

COMPOSITION: of individual shots; symmetrical? Action in center of frame or towards edges? action off frame? types of shots?

_____ _____

CAMERA MOVEMENT: use of zoom, pan, dolly, tracking shot, tilts?_____

_____

SUBJECT MOVEMENT: dynamic? static? in close-up or long shot?

_____

EDITING: describe the pace created? how are commercials inserted? is time compressed or expanded? are important scenes left out or edited too quickly?_____

_____ _____

_____ _____

INTERACTION: how do all these elements work together to create the mood, tone, theme, plot, characterization, conflict and resolution of this program?_____

_____

_____

Sample Activities:

Complete a comparative analysis of the literary elements and video elements used in a commercial program. Try the same analysis for a program presented for entertainment from public broadcasting, such as Masterpiece Theater.

Discuss several television variety programs analyzing the video elements and the variety of special effects.

Create a variety show of your own, deciding which "Famous" guests would appear, and why they would be chosen. Act out such a variety show, learning the "lip-synch" technique actually utilized often on television.

As discussed, each genre of television has its own conventions. Choose one or more types of shows and watch several. Make a list of the conventions followed in the shows. If you can, write a satiric or serious copy of one type of show, using these conventions, and act it out.

Make a survey in your community, school, and peer group of popular television, by asking all different ages of people to list their favorite network programs. Compare your survey to the most recent Nielsen or other commercial survey published.

Keep a record of the values that T.V. programs seem to take for granted (their hidden messages). To do this, make a list of many topics that could be included in television, such as religion, stealing, teenagers, race problems, cities, marriage, family, and so on. Keep a description of how each topic is viewed by the T.V. show that you watch. What valeus seem to be taken for granted?

Be active critical viewers by writing and doing television instead of just watching. Use whatever facilities and equipment you have to learn to produce the T.V. that you see. Even though the quality will differ, your critical skills will be sharpened.

Once you have analyzed what T.V. does, think about what it does not do. What other formats could T.V. consider? What uses could television have that could be entertaining that are not based on the genres we have considered?

(some of the sample activities adapted from T.V.:Behind the Tube, Scholastic Book Services, New York, N.Y.)

TIME FOR A COMMERCIAL MESSAGE?

The advertising community tells us that they must take into consideration the following in preparing commercial messages.

a. buying habits (ages 18-49 target)
b. mores
c. humor
d. demographics

Since statisticians tell us that the average child sees 18,000 commercial messages per year, and this author has plotted an average of 39 messages in an average 2½ hour period of prime time, it is extremely important for the student to be aware of what these "messages" really are saying. There are layers of meaning, and intentional ambiguity, psuedo truths and blurb words that are training our children to view life in terms of commodities.

We would like the student to be aware of the following while watching commercial messages.

1. Type of persuasion technique used in the message

   Examples: sexploitation, humor, family, glittering generalities, expert speaks, leading personality endorsements, fear, guilt, snobbery, name-calling,"stereotypes that are easier to understand" Every once in while a message is presented that is selling the quality of the product with little hype attached. Look for them - they are rare gems.

2. SFX - How do the sound effects contribute to the over-all message? Is it situational, orientational, create foreshadowing?

3. Color- Is the use of color significant? Color is a learned connection in your mind. It often carries a symbolism, or informational message, or emotional significance

4. Lighting - How does the lighting contribute to the message being presented?

5. Camera Movement - How is the camera used to create illusion, giving the ordinary objects "cosmic" meaning?

6. Psycho-graphics - objects take on shapes that have other than product-related significance.

"Good" commercials are supposed to accomplish the following: Provide us with an internal billboard, proven recall, stimulate desire, arouse interest, and most important to impel us to action. The importance of developing a questioning intellect in students surely will aid them deciphering the opinion manipulation techniques.

COMMERCIALS - QUESTIONS WE NEED TO ASK

. To whom and at what level of intellect are the greatest number of commercials geared?

. Should advertisers talk about competitors' products during the commercials?

. Are there too many commercials on television? What is their average length?

. Do some stations have louder commercials than others?

. How do most commercials try to sell to children, women, and men?

. Are commercials offensive? If so, why?

Sample Activities:

A. Have the class discuss product, image, and target audience.
B. Discuss the psychological significance of image-making.
C. Discuss the use of various propaganda techniques not only in product image making, but political candidates.
D. Discuss the NEW commercials and how some images have been altered due to public input, i.e. women, minorities, sex appeal, children's ads., etc.
E. Keep a television log, listing types of commercials, types of persons used in these commercials and the point of view that they present. Did they appear in clusters or individually? What type of appeal was used in the ad that was not purely informational?
F. Keep a record of Public Service Announcements, how many are presented on the commercials stations in your area and especially how many in prime time? Many stations bury the PSA's during late, late evening hours to satisfy the FCC requirement?
G. Record the advertising that accompanies the programming for younger children. What does it consist of? How would you improve or change it if at all? Would you like to eliminate advertising from children's television? If so how and why? If not, support your argument.

RESOURCES

"Consumers Survival Kit," Wisconsin Educational Television Network, 1976. Twenty-two, 30 minute social studies programs for secondary students

"Inside Out," National Instructional Television Center, 1973 30-15 minute programs for eight to ten year olds. one specific program that would be an aid in the analysis of commercial television is entitled "Buy, Buy, Buy. Information on health information, evaluation of products, quackery and health superstitions.

"Media Machine," WVIZ-TV, Cleveland, Ohio. Alan R. Stephenson, Ph.D. , Director of Educational Services, 1975, a series of 8-15 minute programs giving an inside view of media

Problem and the Promise, Pyramid Films, Santa Monica, CA. 1978. A Television/Video Workshop by David Sohn, and a complete list of films and video tapes available for unit building on television analysis. "T.V. ADS-Our Mini Myths" is the specific film used in the development of this workshop

Visual Learning, A Television Workshop for Teachers, New York State Education Department/Bureau of Educational Communications, 1976. A series of inservice workshops on visual learning for teachers.

Teachers Guides to Television, 699 Madison, New York,N.Y. Guides to Prime Time Viewing experiences, and information regarding Parent Participation T.V. Workshops. Gloria Kirshner, Editor

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CLIO distributes compilations of award winning commercials, and teachers' guides to accompany the films.

ACI Films: "Stalking the Wild Cranberry: The Making of a Television Commercial" a 14 minute color film showing the production of the Euell Gibbons ad.

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Rhonda R. Zirbel, taught school for several years and holds a Master's degree in English and Education and is now completing a PhD in Educational Technology with a minor in Film at the University of Wisconsin. She is the producer of several instructional film and video projects. Zirbel is currently lecturing at the University of Wisconsin.